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Reagan, Annoyed by News Leaks, Tells Staff to Limit Press Relations

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 10 — President Reagan complained today that news "leaks" were disrupting work on the budget and other matters and directed that White House staff members get clearance before discussing certain matters with reporters.

"I've had it up to my keister with these leaks," Mr. Reagan was reported to have told aides today, using a slang word for rump. His comment was given out by David R. Gergen, the White House director of communications.

Under a new set of "Guidelines for Press Coordination," Mr. Gergen's office is to designate a small number of White House aides to answer reporters' questions on certain subjects. Staff members not designated must receive clearance from his office before answering questions on those subjects.

Mr. Gergen said Mr. Reagan had become upset because of what he called freelancing by staff members in giving "misleading and inaccurate" accounts of the budget and other matters to reporters. He said it was "appalling" for participants in sensitive budget meetings later to discuss the contents of those meetings with representatives of news-gathering organizations.

"The President has the right to conduct business and make decisions in something other than a fishbowl," Mr. Gergen said.

If the new regulations are complied with, they would sharply change the way White House officials conduct relations with reporters.

Many White House aides decline to discuss sensitive matters with reporters, but on occasion many also engage in a standard practice here of making comments to reporters on the condition

that they not be identified.

Some White House officials were predicting this evening that this practice would continue even with the new guidelines.

White House officials and reporters say a range of motives lead to unauthorized disclosures. In some cases, a staff member wants something publicized to force the President's hand, or to prevent something from happening, or simply to vent some frustration that cannot be expressed to colleagues.

Mr. Reagan has complained in the past of unauthorized disclosures. There was at least one instance in which the appearance of an embarrassing article prompted a demand that staff members submit their telephone records to the chief of staff.

Today's directive was the President's strongest action to date against the disclosure of embarrassing information. Mr. Gergen did not cite the issue of national security in the new campaign against unauthorized disclosures.

Recent Stories Cited

Mr. Gergen cited recent news articles about the budget suggesting that Mr. Reagan was leaning toward military spending cuts and certain levels of cuts in domestic spending programs.

He also cited an article in The New York Times last week quoting a White House official as terming the current stage of the budget process an "unmitigated disaster."

"That is not a view that is shared here at the White House," Mr. Gergen said, adding that various news reports of frictions within the White House staff were also upsetting to the President.

The new guidelines were issued by James A. Baker 3d, the White House chief of staff, who by coincidence was caught today in some embarrassing publicity over an unauthorized disclosure of his own.

In an interview with The Dallas Morning News, published Sunday, Mr. Baker was quoted as suggesting that Labor Secretary Raymond J. Donovan should resign. Last year a special prosecutor cleared Mr. Donovan of charges that he had engaged in illegal labor practices as a businessman.

"Ray Donovan shouldn't be there," Mr. Baker was quoted as saying. "What's he thinking about? He's got his good name now. He's vindicated. Now he ought to do what's right for the President."

Today Mr. Baker issued a statement of regret. "I have apologized to the Secretary this morning that such views appeared in the public press, and I assured him that he continues to enjoy the full support and confidence of the President," he said.

Mr. Baker gave the interview while hunting wild turkeys in Texas over the Christmas holiday. An associate of Mr. Baker's said today that he had mistakenly thought that the interviewer would write only about shooting turkeys.

Mr. Baker signaled his embarrassment to other staff members in his memorandum on press contacts today. At the bottom of the covering page, he wrote: "P.S. The President has refused to make an exception for interviews in turkey blinds!"

The one-page set of guidelines outlined a set of 10 principles governing news contacts. Among these was one that it was "essential" that senior White House aides "be willing to meet with reporters on a frequent basis."

But the memorandum said that "as the need arises," certain "designated hitters" would be selected for answering reporters' inquiries.